The U.S. is experiencing a physician shortage. While this has long been the case in many rural areas and other underserved communities, the impact is being felt more keenly across the country as current demographic trends combine with multiple forces in health care to exacerbate the challenge—heightening the long-term risk for health care providers if they can’t find a sustainable solution.

The evolving role of advanced practice providers
As organizations confront the challenges of a rapidly changing health care environment, many are finding that successful approaches involve the more effective use of advanced practice providers (APPs), specifically physician assistants (PAs) and advanced practice registered nurses (APRNs). The optimized use of APPs enables organizations to mitigate the impact of a physician shortage while also:

• Improving patient satisfaction and operational efficiency via shorter waits and fewer care delays
• Easing the workloads of already overburdened physicians—and reducing the risk of physician burnout
• Creating a cost-effective care team model that optimizes the right skill mix, thereby matching the population served

Because APPs can deliver as much as 85% of the care delivered in primary care, the ambulatory setting has been the logical starting point for APP deployment in many systems. Forward-looking organizations have begun to expand the role of the APP in supporting systemwide efforts to reduce length of stay, smooth transitions and enhance patient engagement. Although rural hospitals in particular are increasingly relying on inpatient APPs to help them overcome physician recruitment challenges, academic hospitals also depend on APPs to help fill in when work hour limits are imposed on residents.

"Since APPs are non-rotating members of the team as opposed to residents, other team members know they can count on us for continuity of patient care, discharge planning and knowing the most efficient way to help patients move through the system."

Sarah Vanderlinden
Assistant Director of Advanced Practice
Medical College of Wisconsin
A growing need to optimize rapidly—yet holistically

With changing reimbursement models, organizations are now seeking ways to accelerate the process of expanding and optimizing their APP workforce. They’re also looking for ways to more effectively integrate APPs into a team-based care model. The solution lies in a combination of the right knowledge, the right metrics and the right technology—using a holistic approach that encompasses organizational culture, structure and processes.

The Vizient® Center for Advancing Provider Practices (CAP2™) is a web-based analytic solution designed to assess organizational culture, structure and process. These metrics serve as the foundational building blocks to effectively optimize the entire provider team, providing members with the knowledge and tools they need to improve clinical outcomes, reduce variation in practice and decrease cost.

Table 1. Rapid growth in the number of APRNs and PAs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>2019</th>
<th>Percentage increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of APRNs licensed in the U.S.</td>
<td>205,000+</td>
<td>270,000+</td>
<td>31.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of PAs certified in the U.S.</td>
<td>101,000+</td>
<td>131,000+</td>
<td>29.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data derived from Sapio,1 American Association of Nurse Practitioners website2 and the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants website.3,4 Abbreviations: APRN = advanced practice registered nurse; PA = physician assistant.

Vizient-recommended strategies to help advanced practice leaders succeed

Through experience helping members build effective provider teams supported by CAP2 data, Vizient recommends the following strategies, which can be used to help organizations build and optimize their provider teams.

1. Build the financial case for deployment
2. Clarify roles and support all team members working at top of license
3. Focus on workforce planning
4. Standardize management approach
5. Navigate complex licensing and credentialing requirements
6. Scale APP deployment strategies through complementary innovation

1. Build the financial case for deployment

There are many benefits to using APPs within the care team. When used effectively, APPs can generate higher operating margins compared to utilizing physicians alone, even though their reimbursement rate could be 15% lower. In addition, APPs can provide advanced care in settings not typically staffed by physicians, increase throughput and improve patient satisfaction. Developing a well-rounded provider team—one with the right skill mix that maximizes the use of APPs—requires a clear understanding of your workforce and the needs of your patient population.

Demonstrating return on investment (ROI) can be complex, and scenarios vary with specific roles. In certain clinical settings, modeling the impact is relatively straightforward, and studies consistently suggest an achievable upside. Yet few benchmarks exist for the more complicated calculus of systemwide deployment. Elements of any analysis must include:

- Billing potential
- Improved performance on value-based programs and related incremental value
- Impact of expanded access on revenue
- Incremental physician productivity due to APP activities
Goals and milestones

- Maximize finances through utilization of APPs in areas with high volumes and favorable compensation-to-collections ratios, and where APPs can significantly improve physician productivity.
- Consider the contribution margin advantage for services in which physician access is constrained or APP salary contribution margin outpaces physicians'.
- Ensure providers understand billing models, develop billing processes that meet regulatory requirements and establish reporting to monitor performance.

="Instead of having to start from scratch, health care organizations should look to CAP2, which already has the needed resources. When you join CAP2, you have access to those resources and tools that other leaders have already developed and tested."

Maria Brillant
Senior Director of Advanced Practice
NYU Langone Health

2. Clarify roles and support all team members working at top of license

One way to effectively utilize APPs is to have the full support of physicians and nurses. Building a truly team-centered approach requires active collaboration between physician champions, nurse leaders and system administrators—not only in the clinical arena, but also in financial and administrative areas. Mutual understanding of each provider’s role is imperative and can be achieved through the coordinated efforts of this multidisciplinary team.

Goals and milestones

- Augment core and specialty privileging lists. Avoid wasted time and resources granting clinical privileges for tasks that can be performed by other team members (e.g., registered nurses, medical assistants and technicians); instead, focus on the highest credentialing and privileges allowed. Refer to state scope of practice laws and local and national privilege data for guidance.
- Ensure that the entire care team, including physicians, is working at the top of license and credentialing. In addition, maximize each team member’s capabilities and expertise. Regular internal audits of case mix will help organizations ensure an appropriate and efficient division of labor.
- Develop fair compensation plans that eliminate competition within the team. Consider implementing a bonus program that would encourage team productivity and negate doctors’ personal loss of relative value units. Measure and disseminate quality and performance scores that demonstrate and reinforce value.
3. Focus on workforce planning

Effective APP deployment depends on the ability to pursue hiring in concert with a systemwide strategy. Begin by determining which roles are needed to drive the strategy, and then identify the most appropriate types of clinicians to fill those roles.

Goals and milestones

- Scan the care continuum to identify new opportunities to address care gaps and to lower the cost of care through strategic APP deployment.
- Recruit, retain and train to secure necessary staff by including onboarding and development programs in strategic planning efforts.
- Address experience gaps by building a culture of professional growth and mentoring.

“We APPs put out fires that otherwise would filter up to the physicians. They’re also the ones looking at our units’ day to day, so they often see process improvement wins we can quickly achieve.”

Jamie Silkey
Assistant Director of Advanced Practice
Medical College of Wisconsin

4. Standardize management approach

As the complexity of advanced practice increases, the management matrix can become muddled with a number of dotted-line reporting relationships. Clarifying accountability and responsibility is essential to advancing new models of care delivery based on shared decision-making. Appointing a director of advanced practice not only enables APPs to have a voice in the organization, but also establishes clear goals and aligned incentives that are well-communicated throughout. Formal APP leadership roles and structures can significantly enhance an organization’s ability to effectively implement and optimize the APP workforce.

An institutionwide leader of nurse practitioners (NPs) or PAs, or leader of all APPs, is a rapidly growing role. According to the CAP2 research, 63% of reporting organizations have an APP with the title of director on staff. This individual may act as the prime liaison between the APPs and the medical staff or nursing leadership, take the lead in quality improvement initiatives and productivity measurement, optimize billing practices, and spearhead orientation and training.

Goals and milestones

- Champion and ensure APP representation on medical staff and credentialing committees.
- Consider various governance structure options to ensure systemwide APP effectiveness, and adjust as needed. Some organizations may initially want to work within the existing unit-based nursing structure while evolving toward a top-down APP leadership structure for all PAs, APRNs and other APPs.

5. Navigate complex licensing and credentialing requirements

Numerous aspects of APP practice are dictated by law and can vary greatly by state. Recognizing the regulatory boundaries established for oversight is an essential step in formulating a strategy that enables all clinicians to work at the top of their license.

Goals and milestones

- Incorporate state NP and PA scope of practice laws into workforce role definitions.
- Scrutinize bylaws to determine if they are a barrier or boon to full deployment, and consider using an advocate to communicate the value of APPs to the organization.
- Review the CAP2 credentialing and privileging resources, as well as benchmarking reports, for specialties and privileges to identify areas of opportunities.

“The question we asked ourselves was, why rebuild something that’s already been built? Why not leverage something built by people in your same position seeking the same end goal?”

Michelle Rubin
Director of Advanced Practice
The University of Chicago
6. Scale APP deployment strategies through complementary innovation

Organizations should assess the virtual health modalities already in existence and those they plan to adopt to determine which can be scaled and aligned to their APP deployment strategies.

Goals and milestones

- Evaluate opportunities to further expand access and increase effectiveness through a combination of APP deployment, technology and care redesign.
- Consider the following deployment opportunities:
  - **Pilot development** — Consider piloting new virtual tools that drive efficiency and empower consumers to enter information up front, as well as future artificial intelligence (AI) tools that help APPs screen for potential diagnoses.
  - **Service partnerships** — Technology partnerships may yield the best ROI as third-party organizations begin directing more AI investments toward tools that augment the APP workforce.

Conclusion

With the right knowledge, strategy and tools—and a commitment to ensuring all clinicians are working at top of license—health care organizations can develop a structure and process to support a sustainable team-based care culture. The CAP2 program is a valuable resource that can help ensure organizations are on the right path to provider optimization.

References


For questions or to learn more about the Vizient CAP2, contact CAP2Inbox@vizientinc.com.